The Late Twentieth-Century War on the Poor: A View from Distressed Communities Throughout the Nation

Jaqueline Jones

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The American economy of the mid-1990s reveals all of the social contradictions, all of the complex cross-currents, of the post-industrial age. In 1994, corporate profits soared by 30 percent, and meaner, leaner companies boasted that they were now “recession proof,” immune to future downswings in the economy. These companies have met the challenge of a new world economic order; they have streamlined and downsized, cut back and consolidated, and in the process have emerged triumphantly competitive in the world marketplace. On the other hand, workers are rewarded for their unprecedented productivity with wage cuts and benefit give-backs on union contracts, and with an avalanche of pink slips. The number of Americans working long hours at two or more jobs is increasing, and the poverty rate is growing, even as Congress continues to shred what little of the safety net remains for those who are victims of a transformed economy. And yet, rather than grappling with the social manifestations of large-scale economic change, politicians and policy makers persist in focusing on the alleged immorality of the poor. Indeed, beleagured poor women of all races now serve as scapegoats for all of the nation’s ills, real and imagined. The same economy that produces profits for corporate stockholders produces poverty for the unemployed and the employed alike.

Within the academy, poverty studies conducted by social scientists aid and abet the current process by which poor people are objectified and blamed for the changes in the job structure that have robbed them of their jobs, their health benefits, their livelihoods, and their dignity.

* Ph.D. University of Wisconsin, Madison; Harry S. Truman Professor of American Civilization, Brandeis University. Professor Jones is also the author of THE DISPOSED: AMERICA’S UNDERCLASS FROM THE CIVIL WAR TO THE PRESENT; LABOR OF LOVE, LABOR OF SORROW.

1 James Sterngold, Facing the Next Recession Without Fear: Newly Lean Corporations Expect to Do Fine When the Tough Times Come, N.Y. TIMES, May 9, 1995, at D1, D5.

2 Id.

3 Id.
A prime example of this particular approach to the study of poverty is the book *The Bell Curve: Intelligence and Class Structure in American Life*, by Richard J. Herrnstein and Charles Murray. While some might argue that this work has received more than its share of criticism from mainstream scholars, and that it represents an extreme view within the social-scientific community, I would suggest otherwise. In several respects *The Bell Curve* is in fact representative of the current political and academic discourse about the nature and meaning of poverty. First, the book ignores history as a factor affecting the way American society is structured today. According to the authors, racial discrimination was pretty much eliminated from the workplace in the mid-1960s; hence all forms of inequality in the 1990s—residential segregation, income differentials, the social organization of labor—reflect not historic patterns of spatial and economic development, but rather the IQ, or general intelligence, of people presently living in the country. According to Herrnstein and Murray, as a society we must dispense with misguided attempts to redeem the poor through schooling or affirmative action; rather we must learn to accept the fact that some people will always be smart—that is, rich—and some people will always be, in the authors’ words, “dumb”—that is, poor. “Rights talk” is therefore so much whining about the inequality inherent in the natural order of society.

*The Bell Curve* also conforms to larger trends in social-scientific inquiry by virtue of its preoccupation with African Americans, and its attempts to sensationalize the danger and alleged degradation of the communities in which they live. Indeed, the book is a prime example of “underclass” studies, those works that purport to examine poverty but in fact consider only one manifestation of it—the inner-city northern black ghetto—and then go on to argue that poor black folks adhere to a “culture” which is the root of all of their problems. (Meanwhile, in absolute numbers the white poor outnumber the black poor by two to one, and the regional locus of black poverty is in the

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5 See id.
6 See id.
7 See id. at 506-07, 519-20.
8 See id. at 177, 200-01.
9 See generally id.
10 See id.
rural South, and larger northern metropolitan areas, not in the inner-city at all.) Finally, Herrnstein and Murray exhibit a fashionable fascination with the powers imputed to poor women.\textsuperscript{12} In their view, these women are the agents of "dysgenesis," that is, the process by which "dumb" babies depress the collective IQ of the nation over time.\textsuperscript{13} Their alarmist predictions about the descent of American society into strife and squalor provide the scholarly context for discussions of "family values" and "welfare reform," euphemisms for the war on the poor currently being waged in the halls of state legislatures and the offices of Capitol Hill.

By focusing on the phenomenon of multiethnic, multiracial distressed communities throughout the United States today, we are able to free ourselves from the conceptual apparatus with which the "underclass" theorists have constrained us. The so-called "family crisis" in these poor communities is not a cause of larger social ills, but rather a symptom of historic economic transformations. We should avoid moralistic generalizations about poor people and instead locate them in a specific time and place—late twentieth century post-industrial America. "Family values" are not the exclusive province of the white middle-class. Indeed, families in a wide variety of distressed communities are staggering under the weight of a new world economic order: their struggles are less related to a crisis in values, or culture, than to a crisis in politics.

In the United States today, increasing numbers of people, and increasing numbers of whole communities, are becoming economically superfluous. By my conservative estimate, fully one-fourth of all Americans are poor or near-poor; these are families that find it difficult to pay the rent, buy new shoes for their children, and put food on the table at the end of the month. This figure includes not only families with parents who are out of work, but also families whose members work for long hours at part-time jobs that pay little and carry with them little in the way of benefits like health care. Thus to the 1990 U. S. census poverty estimate of 36.9 million poor, I would add another 26 million people who subsist just a pink slip or a health-care emergency away from complete and utter disaster.\textsuperscript{14}

\textsuperscript{12} See generally Herrnstein, supra note 4.
\textsuperscript{13} See id. at 341--68.
I. THE HISTORIES OF SOME DISTRESSED COMMUNITIES

Despite the messages we receive from the nightly news and Congressional debates to the contrary, distressed communities are scattered throughout the country, and they are home to a number and variety of ethnic and racial groups. These communities have different histories; they have followed different historical trajectories of development, or decay, but today they all have certain structural characteristics in common, and the people who live in them encounter similar barriers to their economic and physical well being.

Let me briefly describe the histories of several of these communities:

In the Midwest and southern Piedmont, industrial workers have been displaced by advanced technology and competition from foreign imports. Steel workers in Indiana, auto workers in Michigan, rubber workers in Ohio, and textile workers in Georgia and the Carolinas have all paid a heavy price for the elimination of international trade barriers, a development that encourages companies to consolidate their operations, and innovate technologically. Computers and robotics testify to the genius of American enterprise, the adaptability of American businesses, but the efficiency of these machines results in a decline in the demand for labor, and as a result wreaks havoc on workers and their families. The recent history of the steel industry suggest the continued vulnerability of workers, even those employed in reorganized industries. Devastated by cheap foreign imports in the 1970s, United States steel manufacturers abandoned the gigantic, inefficient plants that had for so many years dominated the landscape in cities like Gary, Indiana, and Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Steel mini-mills emerged to take the place of these sprawling structures; the mini-mills produced steel more efficiently, and at a fraction of the labor force, and labor costs, compared to the old plants. However, by the mid-1990s, competition among these newcomers had increased to the point that the weaker ones were being quickly weeded out in favor of their more innovative counterparts. In 1994, the total number of workers employed in the nation’s steel industry was 171,000, compared to 512,000 fourteen years before.

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17 Id. at D8.
On the West and East Coasts, migratory agricultural laborers toil in the fields for long hours at little pay.\textsuperscript{18} Originally consisting of black and white sharecroppers displaced by tractors and other forms of farm technology, the East Coast migrant labor stream now includes workers from Haiti, Cambodia, Laos, and Brazil, as well as, Native Americans and African Americans. These workers exist outside the welfare state; they lack coverage from federal legislation related to unemployment compensation, overtime pay, minimum wage laws, and the health and safety standards established by the Occupational Safety and Health Act. The working conditions of migrant men, women, and children have actually deteriorated as a result of the extensive use of toxic pesticides in the fields. A 1992 General Accounting Office report noted that agricultural ranked with construction and mining as the nation’s most hazardous jobs, and it was estimated that in 1990, four out of ten migrant children at work in western New York state had suffered from contact with pesticides in the fields.\textsuperscript{19} Because of their inadequate housing, they are also at risk for tuberculosis. The home base for East Coast migrants, Belle Glade, Florida, has an extraordinarily high rate of people suffering from HIV, and living conditions, in general, in that town rival the worst anywhere in the nation.\textsuperscript{20}

In other parts of the South, the remnants of the cotton plantation system have left a bitter legacy for the descendants of slaves.\textsuperscript{21} In the Mississippi Delta, for example, the lack of quality education, and good jobs at good wages, suggest the difficulties facing parents who want their children to live a better life than they have had.\textsuperscript{22} In some cases, even new industries hold little promise in the long run for these families.\textsuperscript{23} For example, in Indianola, the catfish industry depends on a workforce that is largely black, female, and poor.\textsuperscript{24} However, not only do the fish processing jobs pay little, they are also vulnerable to larger market forces.\textsuperscript{25} In 1990, a strike of 900 workers at the Delta Pride plant resulted in modest wage increases and better working conditions, but soon after, the whole industry began to institute cutbacks to counter

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{19} Id.
\textsuperscript{22} See id. at 331–32.
\textsuperscript{23} See id.
\textsuperscript{24} See id. at 330; Eric Bates, \textit{The Kill Line}, 19 \textit{S. Exposure} 23 (1991).
\textsuperscript{25} See Cobb, \textit{supra} note 21, at 331.
\end{flushright}
the effects of a saturated market.\textsuperscript{26} This case illustrates the thread of continuity linking a slave past to a postindustrial present; where black women once chopped and picked cotton for white landowners, they now stand for hours and each rip and gut as many as 20,000 fish a day.\textsuperscript{27} Where they once suffered from back-breaking stoop labor, they now suffer from carpal tunnel syndrome, a crippling hand disease.\textsuperscript{28}

Throughout the country, in rural areas where the tourist industry predominates today, poor families (many of them white) piece together a patchwork livelihood of seasonal wage work, gardening, hunting and foraging, and cooperation among kin and neighbors. Two areas of the country in particular have suffered from the disappearance of once thriving, rural-based economies. Along the back roads of New England, off the beaten track in Vermont, New Hampshire, Maine, and parts of Massachusetts, families contend with depressed economic conditions, as they have since the decline of commercial farming in the early nineteenth century. Their plight is quite similar to that of the people of Appalachia, where the coal mining industry collapsed in the 1960s, leaving behind few sources of well-paying, stable, year-round employment.\textsuperscript{29} Indeed, these problems pertain to service workers in tourist industries throughout the country; the wealthier the resort, the more difficult the lives of hotel and restaurant employees who cannot afford to live near their jobs, and must commute long distances each day.\textsuperscript{30}

Over the generations, distressed rural areas have sent millions of migrants out west, up north, and into cities. Not all of those migrants have been able to integrate themselves economically into their new home areas. For example, the neighborhoods of Lower Price Hill in Cincinnati and Uptown in Chicago contain pockets of migrants who pursue illpaid daywork because they lack a foothold in local industry. In the Midwest, in particular, some migrants from Appalachia remain profoundly ambivalent about leaving their ancestral homes; they travel back and forth between West Virginia and Ohio, with great frequency, neither settling in a new place nor completely abandoning their old

\textsuperscript{26} See id.
\textsuperscript{27} See Bates, \textit{supra} note 24, at 23.
\textsuperscript{28} See id.
\textsuperscript{29} For a description of the tenuous and ephemeral nature of wage labor in the Appalachian region, see RHODA HALPERIN, \textit{The Livelihood of Kin: Making Ends Meet \textquoteright{}The Kentucky Way\textquoteright{}} 116-30 (1990).
\textsuperscript{30} See, \textit{e.g.}, Harlan C. Clifford, \textit{For Staff, Mountain High is Pocketbook Issue}, \textit{Boston Globe}, May 30, 1995, at 3.
one. Of his visit to Lower Price Hill, for example, author Jonathan Kozol wrote, "... the place left me disheartened. The children were poor, but with a kind of poverty I'd never seen before. Most were not minority children but the children of poor Appalachian whites who'd settled in this part of Cincinnati years before and led their lives in virtual isolation from the city that surrounded them."31

Returning to the countryside, we note the proliferation of so-called stranded communities, towns and villages that have lost their economic mainstays to Mexico or southeast Asia, to the merger and consolidation movement of the 1980s, or to cutthroat economic competition. These communities include places like Waterloo, Iowa, which lost the bulk of its manufacturing and food-processing jobs when the Rath Meatpacking Plant and the John Deere farm machinery factory cut their work forces drastically in the late 1980s.32 In Hamlet, North Carolina, black and white workers alike suffered the devastating effects of a fire at the town's largest employer, the Imperial Food Products chicken processing plant, in 1991.33 The fire took the lives of 25 workers, and the subsequent closing of the plant forced people in the surrounding area to make difficult choices between going on welfare or commuting to service-sector jobs many miles away.34 Noted one observer, "The loss of a major employer, compounded by the deaths, exposes an industrial backwater here. Hamlet's economy is sinking, and its people are too poor, too locked into their unsalable trailers and weather-scarred houses, or too bound to their families to leave."35

The inner-city ghettos which claim so much of our attention today are of course the product of historic, political forces; they were created by the decisions of big-city mayors, federal housing authority administrators, politicians in both political parties, bankers and real-estate agents, and so-called suburban neighborhood improvement associations. Since the 1960s, some black folks have managed to move out of the ghettos and into the suburbs or stable working-class neighborhoods. Although geographers have identified sixteen metropolitan areas in the Midwest, Northeast, and South as "hypersegregated" areas

32 For a discussion of the desolation gripping areas within rural America, including Waterloo, Iowa, see generally OSHA GRAY DAVIDSON, BROKEN HEARTLAND: THE RISE OF AMERICA'S RURAL GHETTO (1990).
33 Peter T. Kilborn, In the Aftermath of a Deadly Fire, a Poor Town Struggles Back, N.Y. TIMES, Nov. 25, 1991, at 1.
34 See id.
35 Id.
by virtue of their large, concentrated black populations, inner-cities today also include substantial numbers of Latinos, and in some cases, recent immigrants from all over the world.\(^{36}\)

Whether located in the nation’s largest cities or in a decaying New England mill village or a small southern town, enclaves of South East Asian and Central American war and revolution refugees can also be classified as distressed communities. Because of their ethnic and racial diversity, and because of severe local shortages of housing and good jobs, these places are real and potential sites of civil strife. Two notable examples include the Mount Pleasant area of Washington, D. C., home to a large number of recent Central American immigrants, and of course South Central Los Angeles, where a historically poor black population has been forced to compete with Mexican and other Latin American immigrants for scarce jobs and resources.

Native-American reservations—especially those in the Far West which have not instituted casinos and other forms of legalized gambling—represent prototypical poor places. Consider for example the Navajo Nation of Arizona, with its unemployment rate of 85 percent, and no industrial employment within commuting distance; and the Pine Ridge Reservation, home to 16,000 Sioux in South Dakota, approximately two-thirds of whom live in poverty.\(^{37}\) By any measure of distress—alcoholism, mortality, suicide rates, broken families, poor housing, and joblessness—Pine Ridge Reservation is, in the words of one observer, “as poor as America gets. . . ."\(^{38}\)

Another type of distressed community results from the depletion of natural resources, and the subsequent erosion of a traditional way of life in certain areas of the country. Fishing towns and villages along the northeastern coast are now reeling from the effects of diminished reserves along the continental shelf. The plight of these communities is a case study illustrating the ways in which natural and man-made forces, economic and political pressures, and foreign and domestic policy makers have combined to threaten the economic basis of a specific region of the country. Hard hit by competition from foreign “factory trawlers,” the fishermen in towns like Gloucester and New

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\(^{38}\) See id.
Bedford, Massachusetts, rejoiced when, in the mid-1970s, Congress passed legislation to protect their preserves within two hundred miles of the U. S. coastline. However, new and sophisticated fishing techniques—the use of sonar and computers to locate fish, for example—hastened the depletion of cod, haddock, and flounder. Faced with shrinking natural resources and the high costs necessary to outfit new boats, many fishermen have abandoned the sea as their source of livelihood, and turned to jobs in food processing plants or fast-food restaurants. To many families, then, the loss of a fishing business signals more than the loss of a traditional, kin and community-based way of life; it signals economic hardship for their families. And whole towns, like New Bedford, are forced to debate new and unpredictable strategies for revitalizing their communities without an infusion of capital, knowing that even new bed-and-breakfasts and national park sites will never provide the economic basis for a stable community of workers employed at good jobs on a year-round basis.

Finally, it seems ironic to identify some distressed communities as victims of the “peace dividend” and the end of the Cold War. However, it is not difficult to detect emerging pockets of poverty in parts of previously affluent regions of the country—on Long Island, in Connecticut, in California and the Northwest. For example, Groton and New London, Connecticut, are in the process of losing big defense contractors like Electric Boat (owned by General Dynamics), McDonnell Douglass, and Boeing. As these employers scale back their operations, a whole host of secondary services will wither and die. First to go will be the restaurants and dry cleaning establishments, the bookstores and movie theaters. Soon the schools, with their shrunken property tax base, will begin to deteriorate. Mechanics, engineers, and white-collar workers will either have to move out or hope that they and other family members can piece together a living from part-time jobs or contract labor. It might seem odd to include recently affluent towns in my list of distressed communities, along with historically poor places like the Mississippi Delta and certain Indian reservations. Neighborhoods that until a couple of years ago depended on a thriving Cold War defense industry that employed thousands of highly skilled work-

40 Id. at 76, 78.
42 Egan, supra note 39, at 78-79.
ers would seem to have little in common, at least at this particular moment in history, with places that have coped with long-term intergenerational poverty for generations. Yet my point is that even newly distressed communities are undergoing a process not unlike that of their older counterparts—the loss of a local, stable economic base, and the consequent decline in the quality of employment, education, and a whole host of other services.

II. THE "SWEDISH DREAM" AND AMERICANS IN DISTRESSED COMMUNITIES

Clearly, all of the distressed communities that I have described here have different histories. But whether these communities originated in the conquest of an indigenous people (the Navajo Nation in Arizona); in the institution of slavery (in the Mississippi Delta); in the collapse of mining and manufacturing industries (Cranks Creek, Kentucky, Gary, Indiana); the great migrations of the twentieth century (inner-city Detroit, Lower Price Hill, Cincinnati); repression and civil strife around the world (communities of Haitian refugees in Florida, Cambodians in Massachusetts); or major economic or political upheavals around the world today, they all share certain readily identifiable characteristics.

Foremost among these characteristics is a shortage of good jobs for people with little in the way of skills or formal education (good jobs are defined as ones that are stable, well-paying, and that carry health insurance and other benefits). For example, the recent history of South Central Los Angeles offers insights into the civil disturbances in that area in the spring of 1992. In the 1970s and 1980s, the community lost plants belonging to Firestone, General Motors, Goodyear, and Bethlehem Steel. Meanwhile, a large influx of undocumented Latino immigrants made the competition for menial jobs and daywork even more desperate than it had been previously. The recent arrival of relatively well-to-do Korean immigrants, men and women who could afford to open their own stores, heightened class and ethnic tensions within a community that held out little economic promise for the poor of any ethnic or racial group.

In the United States today, the place where you live determines the quality of educational and health services that you and your family receive. Most distressed communities rely on the property tax for funding their educational systems. This simple fact presents us with a
time-honored truism: the poorest neighborhoods have the poorest schools—rundown, understaffed, and overwhelmed by the health and emotional issues that daily plague large numbers of their students. In effect, education in this country is commodified, as is health care. That is, one’s access to these resources is contingent on the relation of one’s family to the labor market. My study of generations of poor black and white people in this country suggests that poor health has been a major factor in their inability to secure, or keep, a job. Too many poor workers have had to take untimely, and uninsured “early retirement” because of ill health, and too many of them have had to relinquish their jobs in order to care for family members whose health problems were created or exacerbated by the lack of preventive care. This nexus of unstable employment, inadequate education, and poor health devastates men and women in poor communities, and their ability to care for one another.43

Changes in the larger economy therefore have a direct impact on the affective component of family relations. In Waterloo, Iowa, the disappearance of blue-collar jobs pushed husbands, wives, and their high school-aged children into the service sector to work at all hours of the night and day. Gone were the family and community rhythms that reflected the factory workday—on the job at 8 A.M., out of work by 6, with time in the early evening to eat dinner together as a family and then go off to a bowling league or a church meeting. All-night supermarkets, nursing homes, and fast-food restaurants claimed the energies of family members who found it harder to find the time and sit down and enjoy each other’s company. These developments reflected not a decline in Waterloo’s “family values,” but rather adjustments by households to a new local economy, one marked by the decline in unionized, blue-collar jobs of the past.

Another characteristic common to all of these distressed communities is some sort of underground economy. The violent drug trade of inner cities is illuminated by the harsh glare of the media spotlight today. But, in fact, most poor communities (regardless of their racial composition or geographical location) include some sort of underground economy: entrepreneurs trafficking in fake green cards, AFDC mothers who are baby-sitting for their neighbors or otherwise earning money “off the books and under the table,” and immigrants presenting

forged social security cards to potential employers. I do not want to
downplay the issue of violent crime that afflicts so many poor neigh­
borhoods today, in the rural South as well as the urban North, only to
suggest that criminal activity of that sort often overshadows a more
general (nonlethal) impulse among many poor people to create op­
portunities for themselves outside the confines of the legal, paid labor
force. Finally, residents of all poor distressed communities today face
a historic conflict between their desire to seek out a better life for
themselves and their children on the one hand, and their desire to
honor kin loyalties and obligations on the other. The history of migra­
tion in this country belies the notion that the poor are fatalistic and
passive. To the contrary, the poor have been the most mobile of all
classes, always searching for a job that pays a little more, a street that
is a little safer, or an apartment that is a little bigger. However, geo­
graphical mobility is fading as an option for many poor people. In a
nationally depressed economy, no particular place beckons to the poor
and ambitious the way the Lower East Side of New York City did in the
early twentieth century and the way the Sun Belt did in the 1970s.
Moving has become an exceedingly expensive proposition—getting a
phone installed; paying the security deposit for a new apartment;
transporting one’s belongings, no matter how modest, across town or
cross-country. Again, I want to stress that the immobility of the poor
today reflects not necessarily a change, or decline in their values,
as much as new constraints imposed by the realities of the labor
market.

As a nation we are not only moving in the direction of a two-tier
society—the people who possess good credentials, good jobs, high
salaries and health benefits versus those who work long hours at un­
skilled jobs in service industries—but we are also showing signs of an
economic aristocracy. More and more, we are who are parents are (or
were). A recent study suggests that, of all the factors that account for
a young man’s ability to earn a middle-class income before the age of
thirty, parents’ income was more decisive than either a college educa­
tion or a white skin. In other words, “the poor were becoming more
likely to stay poor and the affluent more likely to stay affluent.”45
This finding is not surprising, considering the fact that parents’ income
(that is, where they can afford to live) directly affects their children’s
education, health, and general well-being. Because some Western Euro-

45 Id.
pean countries are demonstrating higher rates of upward social mobility among the poor, we might consider substituting the “Swedish Dream” for the “American Dream” as shorthand for the hope, the belief, that hard work and talent will take any young person as far as he or she can go up the ladder of job and financial success.

III. THE PROBLEM WITH THE “UNDERCLASS DEBATE.”

This brief overview of distressed communities and the families who live in them suggests that the sources of poverty are not difficult to identify, but that they will be very difficult to eradicate. Our economy produces poverty as naturally as it produces prosperity. In a loosely regulated free market economy (both national and international), workers remain at the mercy of larger economic trends that many people applaud—the lowering of trade barriers, the processes of technological innovation and corporate consolidation. In the absence of countervailing forces, like strong unions and aggressive government intervention in the economy, people who live in distressed communities will continue to suffer from a crisis in family well-being.

Much of the political discourse on poverty today focuses on the themes of culture and values. Conventional wisdom suggests that the poor are very different from you and me because they hold less dear the “values” that the rest of us abide by—a love of family and concern for the welfare of children. Yet viewed from the perspective that I have stressed today—a long-range, historical perspective—the catch-phrase “decline in family values” seems hopelessly inadequate to help us understand the large-scale structural forces that are affecting American families regardless of race or ethnicity. Furthermore, too often the term “family values” is used to indict mothers of all kinds—middle class mothers who choose to work instead of staying home full time with their children or poor AFDC recipients who choose to stay home with their children instead of working for wages.

Likewise, the term “underclass,” with its implied focus on the black population of northern inner cities, distracts us from the fact that, as I have suggested, poverty is a multiethnic, multiracial phenomenon, and that the problem of poverty affects a wide range of places outside black ghettos. A larger (that is, political) inattention to distress on the countryside leads to an unfortunate series of unstated assumptions. For example, “underclass” theorists would have us answer the following

\[46\] See id.
questions in the affirmative: Is it not better to suffer a slow death from tuberculosis in Belle Glade, Florida, than to be killed in a shootout in the South Bronx? Would you not rather watch your child die of starvation in rural Texas than of an overdose of crack in South Central Los Angeles? Is it not better to focus our energies (in the form of research grants and pilot programs) on black single mothers in the ghetto than on white single mothers in rural Appalachia?

We should refrain from making the choices posed by these questions; better yet, we should refrain from asking these questions at all.

This discussion of distressed communities contains a number of implicit policy recommendations that are worth making explicit now. As a nation we must confront head-on the personal hardship created by a post-industrial economy, and initiate a number of dramatic policies and programs—public-private cooperation in the creation of new jobs; a drastic increase in the minimum wage, so that family members can earn a living wage; universal health-care for all Americans; subsidized child-care and housing for poor families; a federal system of worker retraining for those men and women who need to re-enter the labor forces with a new set of skills; measures designed to achieve educational parity between schools in poor and rich neighborhoods; and finally, a new conception of citizenship, one that links decent jobs and health care with more traditional notions of collective rights and responsibilities. These suggestions might have received some support from liberal Democrats in years gone by; however, in today's mean-spirited political climate, it is by no means certain that even the most modest of these measures would win substantial support from elected officials of either major political party.

The policy makers and pundits who provide a blow-by-blow account of our so-called culture wars suggest that the root of our problems is a conflict of belief systems—those who uphold the integrity of family ties versus those who do not. In these ahistorical times, however, it is essential that we locate the roots of poverty in history, and that we understand that poverty results from a crisis in politics and not from a crisis in values. The forces that are sweeping the globe today are not impersonal forces, but rather the products of political decisions about who shall work, who shall live where, who shall prosper and who shall falter. The purest, strongest family values in the world will not guarantee men, women, or children the economic wherewithal to sustain those values. Our hope lies in a revitalized and even reorganized political system—one based on the premise that the access to a decent job, decent education, and decent medical care are just as fundamental
to the welfare of the country as the right to vote and the right to free speech. Until American citizenship is redefined in these terms, we will continue to live out the future that the past has laid before us; a future in which all the turbulence of the new world order is reflected in the everyday struggles of husbands and wives, the everyday struggles of parents and children.